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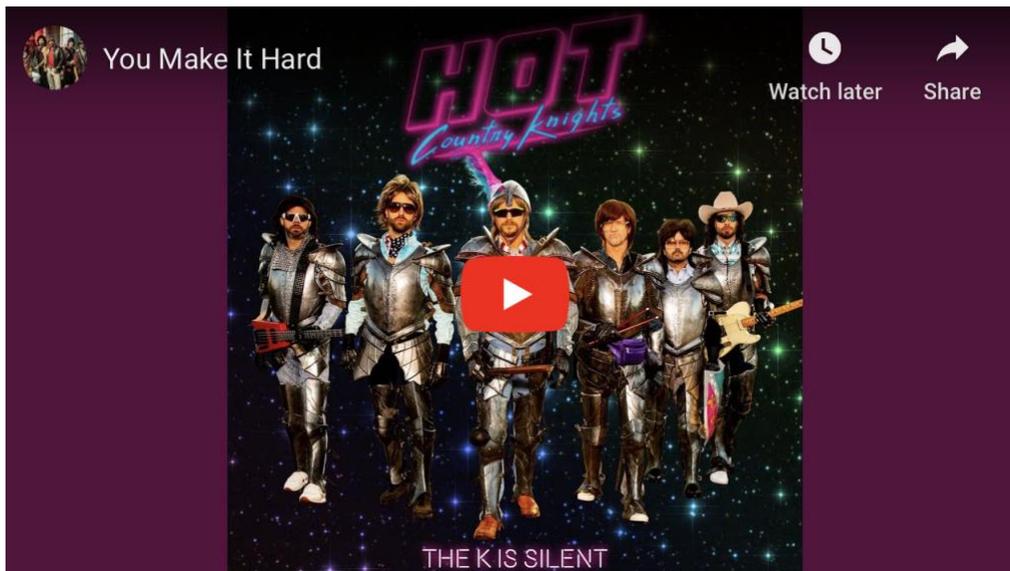
Dierks Bentley's '90s-Lamponing Hot Country Knights and Terri Clark Bring Nashville Raciness Back with 'You Make It Hard' (EXCLUSIVE)

Clark, one of the icons of '90s country, joins "Doug Douglasson" for a steamy duet in the satirical new single and forthcoming video.



It's not hard to see what country fans are enjoying about Hot Country Knights, the group that subsists on 1990s tropes and nothing but 1990s country tropes. The band — whose debut album, "The K Is Silent," arrives May 1 — would seem to be the brainchild of post-'90s country star Dierks Bentley, who will at least confess that he produced the new record, though there'll be no confessing to being the proudly mullet-flying Douglas "Doug" Douglasson. (Also staying in character: bandmates Trevor Travis, Marty Ray "Rayro" Roburn, Terotej "Terry" Dvoraczekynski, Barry Van Ricky and Monte Montgomery, whose chops if not haircuts all bear strong resemblance to Bentley's longtime road band's.)

A week out from the album release, Hot Country Knights have released an additional single, "You Make It Hard," a duet with one of the female country icons of the late '90s (and a star even into the disparaged 21st century), Terri Clark. Variety spoke with "Douglasson" and Clark separately about the randy new ballad and a steamy video that's on the way, as well as some very questionable reasons why the '90s rule.



VARIETY: So, how are you spending your pandemic?

DOUGLAS “DOUG” DOUGLASON: While the rest of the band are in the van, I’m over here at Dirk Brantley’s house, and he’s got a tool shed out back he lets me sleep in. Because there’s not much social distancing with six guys in one minivan. And he lets me come inside and use the microwave to eat my Roman noodles. The whole thing put a little bit of a damper on the Knights sensation. There’s a lot of other people trying to get on the Google and make their presence known now, too. Touring-wise, we should have just played Chicago this weekend and were headed to Boston. I feel sorry for all my gals out there across this country that were excited to see me. My fan base is mostly 65-and-up ladies, and, know, this is not a good time for them with the ‘rona. So I’ll catch ‘em all on the backside of this all, literally. It took us 30 years to get here — this band started in 1990 — and it’ll probably be another 30 years before we actually get out there and tour. But you can’t get rid of us.

With this song you have coming out with Terri Clark, it’s in the tradition of one of the big lyrical subgenres of country music, which boils down to: “I want to have sex with you instead of going to work.” You don’t find that as much in other genres of music like pop or hip-hop. They don’t all want to have sex at 7 a.m. like people in country songs do. Can you explain what that’s about?

[Laughs.] It’s an interesting subgenre. People talk about the bro-country and the trucks and the drunk dial and come on over at 7 p.m., but nobody’s talking about how country music has a little subgenre about morning sex, skipping work — that’s true. We started that, of course. And Terri Clark, we had a little bit of a hard spot for Terri. Hard and soft. There’s always been a lot of chemistry between her and old Doug. Meaning me. Only me and Garth can refer to themselves in third person, by the way.

But old Doug and Terri, there’ve always been sparks that flew there and we finally get a chance to put that on display with this very G-rated song called “You Make It Hard.” I don’t know what you’re talking about, actually, with this morning sex stuff. If you want to read it that way, that’s fine. We can tell where your mind has been. It’s just like a lot of the great Tim and Faith songs back in the ‘90s that you can interpret any way you want to, but it’s just a song about her making it hard — hard for me to leave the room — because we like each other.

So you didn’t get any pushback from country radio who have heard it that it might be pushing the envelope as far as being risqué.

Ahhh, I mean, there's some dirty minds out there, to be honest — we've all been around the block on country radio. But I think this is just a straight ahead love ballad about how when you're really into somebody, when every inch of you is really into that person, you want to just stay in that spot. And the first choice for this song for me was always Terri Clark. She's really the only one that has the balls these days to pull something off like this; she stepped up and took a swing at it and knocked this one out of the park. So we're ready for country radio, and then hopefully TNN and CMT will set the world on fire with the video.

Terri, how do you think your fans will be with this?

TERRI CLARK: I think my fans are ready for about anything I throw at them at this point. They know that I'm usually the one that takes the elevator all the way to the basement before anybody else in the room does when it comes to innuendo. I'm one of the guys in a lot of cases and not afraid of much of anything, so this comes very naturally for me. And you know, Doug and I go way, way back. He loves his '90s country and has such a reverence for it... [She laughs at referring to her counterpart as Doug.] Hey, I'm going with this, okay?

And the whole aspect of putting lovemaking before work in the morning — which Doug has downplayed, in the interest of being family-friendly...

In country music, there's always sexual controversy, and if you look back to the '70s in songs, even some of the Conway and Loretta songs and Barbara Mandrell songs that were out there, there was some pretty risqué stuff. And then I feel like we kind of tone it down a little bit in the '80s, at least after TG Shepherd did his thing, and then into the '90s, there was kind of a resurgence, a little bit.

I think you're right, though. I think that for people who want to leave the rest of the world out, outside of the bills and struggles and having to get up and go and work a shift in the middle of the night or whatever you may do... I mean, country music is American music. It's about blue collar; it's about hardworking, salt of the earth people. And sex is free, man. [Laughs.] So why not take advantage of that? And it's an expression of love between two people, and Doug and I really enjoyed working together and displaying that dynamic in the video. And, um, we took it very, very seriously.

During the lockdown, the song may resonate differently because everyone is working from home now. It's like, "I want to stay in bed. I don't want to get up and go into the other room to work."

Right, exactly. I mean, I sure hope that what's going on now doesn't decrease people's desire for each other because it's too readily available. I'm hoping that this song will help spark some more sexiness between people, even if they are stuck at home and they can't get out, because seriously now it really is "hard to leave this room," because you can't go anywhere. So you may as well make the most of your time together.

I think if there's anybody out there that can't find the humor in this and is offended by it in any way, they should know that we played this song for children and they have no idea that it's anything but a love song. It's a love song because it really, you know, reaches around and in a lot of ways that aren't quite (explicit). You know, it's not going for the low-hanging fruit quite as much as it is hinting at it.

What was it like, getting a little bit down and dirty to make the video?

I saw a lot more of Doug than I really thought I ever would when we did that video shoot. He came out in a pair of Fruit of the Loom tighty-whities and some rather sexy snakeskin cowboy boots, and, well, I saw a lot. I mean, it was pretty hard to hold myself back, so it came pretty naturally. But I was afraid I was going to have to take an anti-nausea medication of some kind, because the bed was spinning pretty good there.

Doug, you have Terri and Travis Tritt as the two guest stars on the album. Did you get all the '90s icons that you wanted for the album?

DOUGLASON: Well, we've got those two on the album, and then we're hoping maybe that Garth sues us for "Make It Rain." That would kind of count for something, if we could get his name involved somehow in the release. There's a little bit of "Thunder Rolls" there on that song, so if we get a lawsuit, we figure that'd be a good thing for us. We thrive on lawsuits. Most of our publicity over the years has been through breaking laws. But Terri and Travis are all we follow on the socials on the Google machine.

To talk about the '90s: I interview some young country singers, and they'll start talking about how they want to get things back to traditional country music with their new album. And I'm thinking, well, they mean Hank or George or Merle. And then I realize, no, by traditional music, they mean the '90s.

Well, we are the '90s, so we appreciate people trying to get back to doing what we do and calling what we do traditional. Of course we don't think of ourselves as traditional. We think of ourselves as really pushing the envelope — trailblazers. With no disrespect to Hank — I, II or III — '90s country really was what solidified the genre as the greatest genre of all time. Look how much higher the hair was. Do you think Hank Williams could wear his hair like we do? He didn't have enough hair to wear it like that. Look at the jeans now. They're tight around the legs. Luke Bryan, he's got 'em all tight around the calves. He's wearing 'em tight in the wrong spots. You've got to wear them tight up front and back, and high, so the ladies can see what they're getting invested in when the show's over. And the colors of our outfits, you know, lots of purples and yellows and pinks — real men aren't afraid of wearing those colors. So it's manly music. And songs about real life, like "Moose Knuckle Shuffle."

Is the '90s love mostly about the styling, or was there anything about the music?

Let's not get complicated here. It's steel guitar, fiddle, drums, and obviously you've got a hot lead player like me on hot lead guitar — or take-off acoustic guitar, I like to call it. The other guys just kind of fill it out and make sure everyone stays away. Kind of like the quarterback and they're like the linemen... As long as I get my hip thrust in there, my spin moves, get my high kicks. I gotta have my roses to hand out. I like to do like an inverted rose move, where I actually turn around and face the crowd with my butt and slide the rose between my legs to make the hand-off. Dirk Brantley, our producer, would tell you that his whole goal with the album was to make sure that people enjoyed the fun, but recognized the songwriting and the musicianship. And we don't really care about that. ... I don't really care too much about what people say about the music. I'll let the Hall of Fame decide that.

There is a strict cutoff in the cover songs you do in concert. You've had arguments about it on stage — if you determine a song was from 1989 or 2001, one of you will cut it off. Was there anything wrong with the '80s?

No, the '80s were great. We've learned a lot from the '80s. Randy Travis was great, and if you hear our pitch-perfect, not-Autotuned harmonies like these kids today, you'll hear a lot of Restless Heart in there. Our problem begins with December 31st, 1999. It just kinda started to take a little bit of a turn and some of the testosterone came out of the music. We love the '80s; we love the '70s. I mean, you can't go wrong going backwards. It's just going forward that's going to be a problem. The back door is always good.

Some people have said you are Dierks Bentley. Is there anything you would want to say about that for the record?

Dirk Brantley had some good hair back in the day. It's kinda like when Tracy Lawrence shaved off the mustache. When Dirk cut off the hair, it kinda hurt a little bit, because we thought he was kind of one of us, with a little bit of a Keith Whitley meets the Greatest American Hero thing happening there in the back. And when he lost that, he kind of lost us a little bit. But sometimes when I look in the mirror, I see old Dirk looking back at me telling me that I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and I can do this. And usually handing me some money to get out of jail, because he's been good for that too. But I do appreciate him offering the second chance or third chance or fifth chance for the Knights to get out there and let the world see what we do, which is kick ass and take names and take your grandma's name and number.

